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AUTHOR Stillman, Ronni Gordon
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ABSTRACT

This document presents a case study of the reinstatement of Advanced Placement European History at Brookline High School (Massachusetts). The paper explores the parents' role in reviving the course and indicates that proponents of the course were rebuffed despite a petition campaign in support of the course. Course backers formed the "Brookline Committee for Quality Education" to press for greater accountability in the public school system. That group, with the support of the press, was partly successfully in a second petition drive. The course returned to the curriculum, but on the condition that students also took a non-Western studies course. The study concluded that parents can have a positive effect on their children's education. The study further underscores the idea that students themselves can be courageous in working with parents and teachers alike to fight for quality education for themselves and for all students. (LBG)

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CONFERENCE ON

IMPROVING HISTORY AND CIVIC EDUCATION

OCTOBER 8-9, 1991

WASHINGTON, D.C.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 9, 1991
EIGHTH SESSION:

"LOCAL CASE STUDY: HISTORY AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT IN BROOKLINE, MASSACHUSETTS"

In Brookline parents organized to support the teaching of high quality history in their local high school. The implications of this case study will be examined by some of the people involved.

Dr. Ronni Gordon Stillman

Harvard University
Brookline Committee for Quality Education

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I have been asked to address you today on the role of parents in the reinstatement of Advanced Placement (AP) European History at Brookline High School. We parents, most of us academics at Boston area universities, have learned how school systems work and don't work and why parents must take an aggressive role in their children's education. The students at Brookline High School had the wisdom to know that they needed academically solid history courses, and the understanding to perceive the non-academic motivations behind the attack on Advanced Placement European History and James Dudley, the teacher of the course. The students battled valiantly with us throughout the one and a half year ordeal to restore this outstanding course to the curriculum. They are the real heroes of the story.

Discovery and Process

When I learned that AP European History had been dropped from the curriculum, I went to see the superintendent of schools to request that the course be restored. This course had been prized by students and their parents for the 31 years it was offered at the high school. Taught by James Dudley for 18 years, it had become one of the hallmarks of high academic standards for which Brookline High School was famous. At the time of its deletion from the curriculum it had two sections with a total of 32 students. The superintendent outlined a process for the group of parents to follow. It should have been a very simple matter to reinstate this course that had been deleted inadvertently from the curriculum. We found out that four of the nine Brookline School Committee members who had voted in the new curriculum prepared by the social studies department had not realized that AP European History was being eliminated. Misleading language on the school committee course change docket implied that the social studies department was adding Advanced Placement Government to the list of course offerings for seniors, not replacing AP European History with it.

The superintendent's process included meetings with the headmaster of Brookline High School and the acting chairman of the social studies department. We would also appear before the curriculum subcommittee of the school committee which would in turn recommend action to the full school committee.

Rationales

At our meetings with the headmaster and the acting chairman of social studies we were shocked to hear that the results of their six-year process of curriculum revision (1982-88) could admit of no modifications; that Brookline was "on the cutting edge of curriculum reform"; that this new curriculum was "experimentation". We were told that AP European History "did not fit this new scope and sequence" and was therefore incompatible with the new curriculum because the curriculum could no longer be "Eurocentric" due to changing demographics. We were told that the new curriculum was designed to include groups of people previously excluded. This made no sense to us because since the early 1970's there have been courses in the social studies department in Black Studies: Afro-American

History, Asian Studies, Women in Society. The League of Women Voters of Brookline study of social studies written in 1973 states that "social and ethnic histories have entered the curriculum and the Western tradition no longer dominates." We could not understand how a quality history course could be incompatible with any social studies curriculum, but we were told that the social studies department was not a history department. Perhaps the most disturbing response given to us was that the goal of the new curriculum was "to deliver a unified set of values to the students." It took us about one year to realize that this "unified set of values" is Brookline High School's own version of "political correctness."

We also learned from the headmaster that the so-called Advanced Placement Government course that was to be the replacement for AP European History was a one-semester course in American Government followed by an internship in local politics. Surprised by the unacademic nature of the course, I called the College Board and got a full description of Advanced Placement American and Comparative Government and Politics, a rigorous academic course that did not at all resemble what the social studies department was planning. It includes one semester of American Government and Politics and a second semester of Comparative Government and Politics of Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, China; and Mexico, India or Nigeria. We supported unequivocally the addition of AP American and Comparative Government and Politics to the list of senior electives.

The First Petition

We could not understand why our seemingly irrefutable academic arguments were met with hostility and countered with lies on the part of the acting chairman of social studies and some members of the school committee. We decided that a petition requesting that AP European History be reinstated would be a powerful instrument of persuasion. Over 450 people, including 188 students, signed their names to our petition. We also contacted former students of AP European History and their parents, as well as prominent educators in history and political science, such as Simon Schama and Stanley Hoffman, both of Harvard University, to write to the superintendent of schools, the assistant superintendent for curriculum, and the acting chairman of social studies. Approximately 50 letters were sent, all testifying to the importance of the subject matter and to the major impact that James Dudley and AP European History had had on the intellectual development of the students. One of the parents who wrote, Sheldon Glashow, a Nobel Prize winner in physics, stressed the importance of the course to his two children who had taken it. Former Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis called James Dudley in support of the restoration of the course; two of his children were among Mr. Dudley's former students.

Ad Hominem Attacks

The irrational opposition to the reinstatement of AP European History manifested itself in the behavior of our elected officials on the school committee. At the curriculum subcommittee meeting, the school committee member chairing the session received our petition with contempt, tossing it

onto the table disdainfully. Parents, students and James Dudley had to beg for the opportunity to speak. The acting chairman of social studies called our efforts "arrogant, fraudulent, disingenuous" and introduced another theme of the controversy, the hostility toward high-achieving students, by saying that our concern was for only a tiny segment of the students taught by the social studies department. Among the critics who opposed our efforts most vociferously were teachers and a principal from the Brookline schools. We realized that the acting chairman of social studies had used his skills as head of the teachers' union to muster support against the parent/citizen efforts. We found it shocking that the school committee seemed to encourage these attacks. Rather than act as they were supposed to on behalf of the students in loco parentis, they chose not to take a stand while allowing hostility to escalate between parents/citizens and teachers. The school administration also collaborated in allowing tension to escalate by taking no stand. The school committee and the school administration cared more about looking good than doing the right thing. Ad hominem attacks on us and James Dudley became characteristic of the opposition to AP European History. We parents were labeled "elitist bullies, conservatives, creationists, brownshirts, racists"; James Dudley was accused of being "racist, sexist, homophobic and anti-Semitic."

School Committee Votes Down AP European History

On December 19, 1989 the school committee voted 6 to 3 against the reinstatement of AP European History. That elected body preferred to stand by its error of the previous year rather than abide by the will of the community, which had come to see European History as the symbol of academic excellence at Brookline High School. The school committee offered our children a bogus compromise that allowed tham to take AP European History as independent study, an option that they had always had. This eleventh-hour compromise had been arrived at by members of the school committee and members of the teachers' union. The assistant superintendent for curriculum made statements to the press defending the elimination of AP European History on the grounds that it was incompatible with a multicultural curriculum stated that parents' intervention in a curriculum matter was ill-advised because it discouraged teachers from "taking risks." It seemed apparent to us that our school committee and school administration were working against the interests of our children.

The Founding of the Brookline Committee for Quality Education

In spite of our thoughtful arguments, our scrupulous following of process as outlined by the superintendent and our substantial community support as evidenced by the petition, we were unable to persuade the school committee to reinstate AP European History. We recognized that we had to organize more formally to be effective and in January, 1990 the Brookline Committee for Quality Education (CQE) was incorporated to press for greater accountability in our public school system. In our efforts to restore AP European History to the curriculum, we discovered problems with the social studies curriculum as a whole that put into question the academic quality of

some of the courses the students were taking. In our attempts to get more information about these courses we ran into formidable obstacles. In spite of Massachusetts laws requiring public availability of curricula and syllabi, the Brookline Public Schools refused to make these materials available to us. We had to resort to Freedom of Information Act requests to get course outlines that we taxpayers had paid to develop. On two occasions these requests were denied and we had to forward copies of our correspondence to the Secretary of State who ruled in our favor.

The Press

The Committee for Quality Education had a strong ally in the press. Not only did "The Brookline Citizen", our newspaper of record, come out in favor of the restoration of AP European History, but it continued to print all developments in the educational controversies of the town: the unacademic "World in Crisis" course, the problem of stacked search committees, the exclusion of some parents from the decision-making process, the spending of large sums of public money on unacademic "new age" consultants and slick public relations experts, etc. Discussion of these issues in the press helped to restore some openness to the school system and involved more people in the debate. Articles and letters about Brookline's public school wars appeared in the "Wall Street Journal", the "New York Times", the "Chicago Tribune", the "Boston Herald", the "Boston Globe", the "Jerusalem Post", the "Brookline Journal", the "Brookline Tab", "The New Republic", "New York Magazine", "Time", "The Nation", and several professional journals. Members of the CQE discussed our issues on both public and commercial radio and television.

The Second Petition; AP European History Voted in with Restriction

Much of the effort of the Committee for Quality Education has consisted of demanding that the Brookline school system abide by the laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. For example, Massachusetts law gives students and their parents the right to petition the school committee to institute a course not presently offered. The school committee must consider the course if 30 students and their parents request it. Since AP European History was no longer offered at Brookline High School, this law was appropriate. The students showed their unfailing courage in collecting the signatures, bucking intimidation and harassment by some members of the social studies department. The reaction of the school committee and the administration to these students was disappointing. They claimed that since sophomore European History was offered the students had no grounds to petition for AP European History. We asked for a ruling from our private lawyer and from the legal office of the Massachusetts Department of Education. Both ruled that sophomore European History and AP European History, like sophomore biology and AP biology, were different courses. The lawyers' ruling affirmed the students' right to petition for the course. The student petition worked and on December 18, 1990 the school committee voted in AP European History, albeit with the following restriction:

"Students choosing freshman social studies courses are advised that they must take a course providing a non-European, non-American perspective if they plan to take both European History (Honors) in the sophomore year and European History AP in the senior year..."

According to this vote, students studying European History have to fulfill a requirement in non-Western studies, while students taking only non-Western courses do not have to take any European History. The social studies department has never explained why it was so concerned with insuring educational breadth for the approximately 30 students interested in AP European History but not for the other 1750 students at the high school. Moreover, the meaning of the oft-repeated phrase "non-European, non-American perspective" has never been defined by the social studies department or the school administration. Are they suggesting that all non-Western peoples think alike? How does Russian Studies, one of the courses that satisfies the non-Western requirement, communicate a "non-European perspective"?

Multiculturalism

The concept of multiculturalism which has been used to justify the social studies curriculum revision of the 1980's, has never been adequately explained by the social studies department, the school committee or the school administration. In November, 1990, one year ago, The League of Women Voters of Brookline sponsored a forum on multiculturalism in the Brookline schools at which the assistant superintendent for curriculum presented her vision of multicultural education. The cornerstone of her multicultural curriculum is the theory of consultant Peggy Means McIntosh whose 100-year plan is ideologically opposed to academic achievement and promotes hostility toward white male children. This ideological strain of multiculturalism which teaches contempt for Western civilization and promotes the extremist ideas of radical feminism has replaced the academic multiculturalism that had been in place in the Brookline schools since the early 1970's. The animus toward Western civilization and white males is well documented in the speeches of high-priced consultants who have lectured Brookline teachers at the invitation of the assistant superintendent for curriculum. Multiculturalism, as it is being promoted in Brookline since the 1980's, is a red herring. Like the term "diversity", it is an excuse for the dumbing down of curriculum, the removal of leveling and the imposition of particular, narrow political points of view.

Accomplishments of the Brookline Committee for Quality Education

First and foremost, the Brookline Committee for Quality Education is responsible for the restoration of Advanced Placement European History to the curriculum.

Second, we are responsible for the institution of the College Board Advanced Placement American and Comparative Government and Politics course rather than the sham that was originally intended. This year 30 students are taking AP European History and 28 AP American and Comparative Government and Politics, a full 15% of the senior class. We

hope that the advanced placement courses will serve as a model of academic rigor for all social studies courses and that a more democratic process of admitting students into AP courses will be instituted so that all those who wish to take these courses will be allowed, indeed encouraged to do so. We would suggest also that the school system pay the students' fees to take the exams for these courses.

Third, the CQE has made education a major topic of discussion in Brookline, as is appropriate in a community which attracts many of its residents because of the reputation of its schools. Many parents are less hesitant than they used to be to question school officials about syllabi and programs that they think are of questionable academic value.

Fourth, because of our efforts, there is now a process for curriculum inquiry that gives parents and citizens the right to all information about courses and curricula, and a curriculum development process that guarantees parent input at all stages of development.

Fifth, because of our insistence on compliance with the law, course syllabi and reading lists are now available in Brookline school and public libraries, as they are in other Massachusetts communities.

Sixth, some of the hostility to highly motivated, high-achieving students that was documented in the 1973 study by the League of Women Voters of Brookline has begun to be eroded. There is greater acceptance of the need to offer these students challenging courses.

Seventh, we pressed for, and obtained, a public hearing on the academic deficiencies of the sophomore course called World in Crisis, a course designed for lower-achieving students and the centerpiece of the social studies 1980's curriculum revision.

Eighth, we called for an examination of the policy of selecting consultants for staff development by publicizing two academically fraudulent consultants brought in by the administration. It is our hope that the school committee will no longer invite costly fringe consultants like Peggy Means McIntosh, associate director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, to address Brookline's teachers. Three years in a row McIntosh formally presented to the staff of the school system her New Age "epistemology" which expresses hostility to white male children and ideas on race-specific and gender-specific thinking processes that are totally unsupported by any academic research. The other so-called academic consultant, Edwin Nichols, wasted the time and insulted the intelligence of the staff with the most heinous examples of racial stereotyping. His presentation was devoid of any academic substance. Teachers need and have the right to information in all academic disciplines that only academic consultants can provide.

Conclusion

As we review the events of the AP European History controversy we are struck by a number of truths about the Brookline school system that can best be summed up as a colossal failure of leadership. The Brookline School Committee, even when it knew it had erred in inadvertently deleting the course, refused to rectify its error. Rather than confront the issues and admit

that it had a seriously flawed social studies curriculum, it chose to support their error callously disregarding the wishes of the students and the community. The school committee allowed the controversy to escalate by setting teachers and parents against each other and groups of parents against other groups of parents. In its desire to stay out of the controversy and "look good", the school committee allowed the incompetent headmaster of Brookline High School in concert with the acting chairman of social studies to make ill-conceived administrative decisions and to continue the persecution of a social studies faculty member.

The Brookline Committee for Quality Education formed in response to this massive failure of leadership and accountability on the part of the Brookline School Committee and the Brookline School Administration.

The Brookline Committee for Quality Education has inspired greater hope among academic-minded teachers at the high school. Although too intimidated to speak out publicly, they call members of the CQE to encourage us to persevere in seeking academic integrity in the curriculum. We are committed to working for the very best academic curriculum in social studies and in all disciplines for all students. We shall attempt to work with the new chairman of social studies to revoke the discriminatory restriction on students studying European history and develop a curriculum based on history, not on educational fads. We maintain that all students must study Western history, non-Western history and United States history. We propose two years of World history in grades nine and ten, United States history in grade eleven and history and government electives in grade twelve: AP European History, AP American and Comparative Government and Politics, history and government of Latin American, Middle Eastern, Asian, and African countries.

It is clear that committed parents can have a positive effect on their children's education. Who could possibly care more about our children than we? We know that our children are courageous. We watched them fight for their rights to a quality education for themselves and for all students. We watched them defend the rights of their teacher, Mr. Dudley. We saw their highmindedness, their extraordinary commitment to principle and ethical behavior, and their effective qualities of citizenship. They experienced the very best of participatory democracy in their use of petitions, their study of some Massachusetts General Laws, their speeches before the school committee and other bodies, and their writing of letters to the newspapers. Our children, and all those who follow them, have a right to know the truth that only the study of history can reveal. Our task, as parents, is to protect their right.

Submitted by Dr. Ronni Gordon Stillman